

Wrestling Perspective

• Analysis and Commentary From The McLaughlin Group of Professional Wrestling •

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Does Sid Vicious Rule Wrestling or Just WCW?

Recently, Sid Vicious rejected a contract with WCW that would have paid him an estimated \$7,000 to \$8,000 per week. Vicious will sit out his contract until the beginning of October when he will probably start working for Titan. After making demands that were beyond reason and using tactics previously reserved for baseball and football players, Vicious reportedly first agreed and then rejected a contract that would have made him the third highest paid wrestler in WCW.

Is Sid Vicious worth \$350,000 a year? Is a man who spent the latter part of 1989 and the first five months of 1990 out of action with a punctured lung worth an extra \$100,000 to \$200,000 a year? Is an employee who would rather play softball than work worthy of a raise? What was Vicious' potential value to WCW? Did WCW set a dangerous precedent by offering to renegotiate an existing contract? These are just a few questions that have been raised by the recent situation between WCW and Vicious.

With the exception of Lex Luger, Ric Flair, Sting and possibly the Steiners, if any other wrestlers in WCW were to try and renegotiate their contract, they would find the management's door slammed in their face. WCW has played contract games with many wrestlers. They lost Ricky Steamboat and Mike Rotunda because they were unwilling to work out equitable agreements for these men, despite their value to the company. While Steamboat may not have drawn large crowds during his tenure as champion, that was the fault of George Scott, not Steamboat. Further, the box office with Steamboat was significantly better than the current box office. Rotunda may not be the most charismatic wrestler in the world, but his Michael Wall Street character was the first wrestler under Ted Turner's ownership to gain positive widespread mainstream publicity. WCW was unable to see the value of these two men and the company is suffering because of it. Both Rotunda and Steamboat are now in the WWF and, while not prototype WWF wrestlers, they have both enjoyed previous success and should enjoy success there again.

WCW didn't know what they had in Rotunda and Steamboat. They think they did with Vicious. The superstar potential of Vicious has been the talk of the wrestling world for close to two years. His charisma and physique could one day make him the top draw in wrestling. Given his potential superstar status, WCW choose to do whatever was necessary to keep him including spitting in the face of every loyal wrestler in the promotion. But, in the end, it was Vicious who did the spitting. Despite all of Vicious' potential, he is still a below average wrestler who as yet to emerge as a major superstar. He gets huge pops at the arenas, however, with one exception, he has never drawn an excellent crowd in the headline position. Still, everyone keeps discussing his potential. It is that potential that forced WCW to try to work out an agreement with Vicious.

There are two reasons why WCW wanted to keep Vicious. The first is his long term value to the organization. Vicious is the wrestler most likely to be the largest drawing card of the 90s. Losing him may severely damage the company. Despite how he may perform in the ring, Vicious has the potential ability to be wrestling's top draw. In fact, he is the only wrestler WCW had who could possibly have out drawn Titan's top performers. While

WCW has El Gigante, Lex Luger and Sting, none of them seem to have the possibilities of Vicious. Gigante will be a great attraction, but he will never be the bread and butter of the promotion. Luger is perceived as the wrestler who can never win the big one and while he is far superior to Vicious, fans don't perceive him as unstoppable or invulnerable. Sting will always look great as a challenger, but after his aborted title reign, WCW is not going to put him in the top spot for quite some time. Brian Pillman, Barry Windham and even Bobby Eaton all have tremendous potential in top spots, but they need to be built up over a long period of time. Vicious had the popularity to be built as the next superstar now and should have been promoted that way. WCW has been unable to create a major superstar and Vicious has the qualities that should make him one. The major question is could it have been done in the WCW environment? History says no.

The second reason WCW tried to keep Vicious is a concept known as warehousing. In television, a station will often buy the rights to a particular program and then not air it. The concept is that while they may not have room for it in their schedule, the program could do enough damage if owned by the competition, that the program merit spending the money on it, even though they won't air it. Vicious would have been the classic case of a warehoused wrestler. Although WCW could not figure out how to promote Vicious, Titan will probably do it in a second and the results will be extraordinary. The damage Vicious will do to WCW when he goes to work in the WWF should be phenomenal. WCW's image of a minor league promotion will be solidified beyond any reasonable doubt. After losing the Road Warriors, the Nasty Boys, Mark Callous and Mike Rotunda to the WWF, the loss of Vicious will merely confirm the perception of WCW as a WWF farm system. Yet, more important than the image problem is what Vicious will do in the WWF. Undoubtedly he will reach main event status in a relatively short period of time. Once he hits that point, he will draw a great deal of money for Titan in the same cities WCW promotes. The WWF will tighten its stranglehold on the cities it owns and damage WCW's gates in the cities where they compete. Vicious has tremendous value to the competition and WCW failed to keep him away from their competitors. Now that Vicious is going to the WWF, Titan will become stronger and WCW will fall farther behind.

Vicious' work has improved somewhat and when put in the ring with a talented opponent, he is able to have decent matches. But, he really isn't better than the Ultimate Warrior in the ring, just more awe inspiring. Still he has potential and it is that one word that forced WCW to attempt to renegotiate his contract. It is why WCW tried to keep him, because the potential could have either benefited or hurt their organization. Vicious may never become a top caliber worker. The odds are against it. Poor workers in WCW don't draw. But at this stage, neither do the best workers. Vicious has superstar written all over him and one day he may reach that status. WCW hoped he would do it for them. It was insulting to every talented worker the company treated like trash, but WCW felt despite his unproven worth, Vicious was worth whatever it took to get him.

Was Sid Vicious worth \$350,000 to WCW? Probably. Even though Vicious has yet to hit his stride as a major draw, the potential is there. \$350,000 was not too much to spend on the future, rather it could have been an investment. An investment that could have paid off with interest in a few years. WCW doesn't have to compete with the WWF for the top spot. It's too far behind to make even a feeble attempt, but that was no reason to let the possible top attraction of the 90s jump to the competition. WCW had Vicious. They could have used him.

Sidelines

Thanks To Dave Meltzer, Ron Lemieux, Jeff Mullins, Sheldon Goldberg and Wade Keller for their kind plugs. We appreciate the support.

Wrestling Then & Now is an excellent nostalgia bulletin put out by Evan Ginzburg. The latest issue featured an excellent interview with John Tolos and the next issue will feature an interview with the Guiding Light, Captain Lou Albano. WT&N is available from Evan Ginzburg at PO Box 471, Oakland Gardens Station, Flushing, NY 11364 for \$1.25 per issue.

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Is Air Pillman Ready To Fly or Crash?

By - David Skolnick

After spending the past several months as a forgotten employee, World Championship Wrestling has finally decided to give Brian Pillman the opportunity to prove his worth. Can Pillman be the man? Can he succeed where Sting failed? Ric Flair can no longer carry the weight of the promotion on his shoulders. Will Pillman, often referred to as Flair's protege, take over now that the "Nature Boy" has begun to show signs of his age?

If enthusiasm and ability were all that made up a world champion, Pillman would have captured the gold a year ago. Besides the Young Pistols, there is no one in the company with more energy and genuine enthusiasm than Pillman. If he's faking it, he's doing an excellent job. From his ring work, it should be obvious that Pillman loves to wrestle. As far as ability goes, he's one of the best aerial wrestlers in this country and can also work very well on the mat. Naturally, his matches with Ric Flair, Barry Windham, Rip Rogers and Buddy Landell are better than his bouts with Sid Vicious or the Big Cat, but he even makes the bad matches watchable.

Pillman's size is a shortfall as he looks small compared to the average wrestler. Compare him to Vicious or Lex Luger and Pillman looks like a child. But, WCW has been able to cash in on Pillman's size. Like Bob Backlund, Pillman should play the role of the underdog in a majority of his matches. He was brilliant a year and a half ago during his feud with Luger over the U.S. title. Fans enjoyed watching Pillman embarrass the big man and their matches were consistently excellent. He reprised that role during the War Games at WrestleWar '91. Of course he was out of his league as far as size goes when he faced off against Windham and Vicious, but that was the idea. He is not going to gain 20 pounds or a few inches, but he can still be a believable champion. In this day and age of muscular wrestlers who don't sell moves, an underdog babyface would be quite refreshing. Also, fans would be able to identify with the small man in a big man's world and rally their support around Pillman. Who is the average person more like: a quiet, small hard working man like Pillman, a monster like Vicious or a face-painted cool California dude like Sting?

Sting's tenure as World Champion can be categorized as a failure for several reasons. He had to work with poorly devised angles that didn't permit him to wrestle to his capabilities.

He was also coming back from a career threatening injury. Some say he lacked dedication, didn't sell enough and had weak opponents. WCW failed with Sting but must be able to learn from this.

Scott Steiner is not ready for several reasons. Since he has worked mostly tag team matches, he has not been able to adjust to singles bouts. That fact was painfully obvious during his Clash match with Flair. Although many thought the match would be a classic, Steiner seemed lost in the ring and like he was going through the motions. Any plans to put the strap around his waist in the near future were quickly abandoned. Also, without Doom and the Midnight Express, WCW can ill afford to break up another top team. Without the Steiners, the top teams would be the Pistols, the Freebirds and the Horsemen. They are all solid teams, but not the calibre of the Steiners. The Pistols show promise but they need more time. The Birds are a great comedy duo, but are not what they used to be. Finally, the Horsemen, or non-Horsemen, are great, but they split their time between tag teams and singles matches. The promotion would be making a fatal mistake if they broke up their most popular team.

Sting didn't work out and at this point and time, and it doesn't appear Steiner will either, Pillman could. Pillman gives a very good interview, which is quite rare for a babyface today. In fact, besides Luger, Pillman gives the best babyface interviews in WCW. Meanwhile, Sting and Steiner have serious problems in this category. Maybe it's time for a change. Luger, Sting and Steiner have all been named as possible successors to Flair's throne, but perhaps the public is looking for an alternative to the musclemen. While Pillman is muscular, he is small and tough. He's got an inner strength and determination that would make him believable as world champion. Jim Ross is always remarking about Pillman's toughness and that will be a necessary selling point if Pillman is to be successful as the lead babyface.

Pillman will have his problems if he becomes the promotion's top man. First off, WCW has not been able to create a top star in years. However, if they market Pillman properly, they should be able to succeed. Having him carried out of WrestleWar after a courageous showing garnished a great deal of sympathy for him. This is not to say Pillman should get beat up by every heel in the promotion, but an occasional angle with Pillman getting attacked should work. Secondly, Pillman will need to work with great workers like Arn Anderson, Terry Taylor and Flair and score upsets over them. These men do not dwarf Pillman and would provide great matches. Pillman would need to be perceived as a giant killer. He will need surprise victories over Windham and Stan Hansen. But, he shouldn't be bogged down in feuds with big men. He is supposed to be an underdog, but he should spend most of his time with wrestlers his own size.

WCW needs to give the fans a wrestler they can put their hope in. Pillman has learned a lot in the year and a half he has spent in WCW. He has spent the past few months in relative obscurity. He was pulled from the Clash title bout against Flair and prior to WrestleWar had not appeared on the past few PPVs or Clashes. But, Pillman has a great deal of potential and WCW seems poised to give Pillman a major push. The promotion should be commended for this bold move. Pillman will surely prove that WCW made the right move by promoting him as the top man.

The Wrestling Interview - A True Art Form

By - Vic Stanley

The pre-event interview is essential to the development of anticipation for any major sporting event like a championship boxing match, the World Series or the Superbowl.

Many bold statements are made which must eventually be wither lived up to or lived down afterward. Poor Buster Douglas was indeed, next on Holyfield's hit list, regardless of his claims before the fight. Sugar Ray Leonard just learned the same lesson. Unlike other sports, the ability to sell oneself verbally, and not necessarily through one's athletic prowess, is what separates the men from the boys in pro wrestling. In this sport, it is ultimately important for an athlete to be able to talk a good game. Sid Vicious is the perfect example of this theory. His pre-Halloween Havoc commercial with Elvira displayed more wit, effort and higher production values than the actual match.

The highlight of today's weekly wrestling shows is often the interview segments. In many respects, these spots require the most effort by the performers because, unlike their matches, they can't fake the ad libs. Wrestlers must be able to think and speak on their feet. Even if cue cards are used, how many other sports require an athlete to be able to read? Certainly no any college spawned sports if Lawrence Taylor is a typical example. In this respect, wrestlers are much better performers than many mumbling legitimate athletes who sometimes don't even speak English, but are interviewed anyway as if they had something of consequence to say. Many very competent wrestlers never make the big time solely because their mike work is lacking the special spark that really puts them over. In these instances, a good manager is often the missing ingredient to the formula. Dave Meltzer has recently noted that the Michael Wall Street angle may be more effective with Terry Taylor since he is a better talker than Mike Rotunda. In either case, Alexandria York is still the key to this scenario.

Although there was an overall air of crassness and insincerity in last summer's Hulk Hogan/Earthquake angle, particularly the manner in which Hogan's injuries were handled, his initial comeback monologue was very well done. It combined just the right amount of humility, pathos and quiet determination to give Hogan's persona a three dimensional quality that is so often lacking in most wrestling spots, including his own. As with the aforementioned example of Vicious, this spot was vastly superior to the actual match. Perhaps Vince McMahon is finally learning that it sometimes works to his advantage to portray his heroes as the underdog rather than the invulnerable comic book character. Instead of relying on his usual bulged eye ranting, Hogan succeeded this time through understatement and subtlety. Ric Flair did similarly effective spots when he was attacked by Terry Funk. Flair and Hogan, when at their best, are the consummate professional interviews. This is what really sells a wrestler to his audience. On the other hand, performers like the Ultimate Warrior can't interview any better than they can wrestle, but very few wrestlers get to the top with this dubious combination of non-attributes. There are a lot more words in the English language than there are wrestling holds. It is to the definite advantage of any wrestler to master both aspects of the sport. Even when a wrestler butchers the language, this can do much to further endear him to his fans if he does it with humor and style.

A wrestling manager's primary function, other than interfering in matches, is the spot interview. It is pure cometic entertainment value. Jim Cornette, Paul E. Dangerously, Bobby Heenan and Lou Albano are standouts when it comes to ad libs and off the cuff remarks. Their presence keeps the TV shows moving, providing continuity between an endless string of boring squash matches. There have been recent instances when the company bureaucrats have been reluctant to let managers steal the thunder from the wrestlers even when the talent has been very limited. Before leaving WCW, Cornette lost much camera time because of this misguided apprehension. It's a shame that Cornette couldn't have held out until Ole Anderson left. Hopefully, Dusty Rhodes will not give himself too much camera time, but instead wisely use his talent at hand. Dangerously is the best mouthpiece currently in WCW and Diamond Dallas Paige might possibly pick up some of the slack created by the absence of Cornette.

The wrestling announcers provide the verbal springboard for the wrestlers and managers. Playing straight man is an art form in itself. Gene Okerlund has made a career out of mugging for the camera, asking leading questions and cringing. Although he has many

detractors, he is perfect for the cartoonish WWF presentation. Jim Ross, although less tongue-in-cheek, also displays moments of cometic talent, especially when working in tandem with Dangerously or Missy Hyatt. Meanwhile, Herb Abrams insisted on doing his own play by play announcing. Abrams' overly bombastic announcing style combined with his lack of technical knowledge only serves to cheapen the overall presentation of an otherwise fairly professional effort. Why does poor Bruno Sammartino always seem mortified with his broadcast partner? First it was the hyperbolic McMahon, now it is a hyperactive Abrams. "I can't see him breathing, Bruno! He's not breathing!" "Oh come on, Herb. We just can't see his chest moving from here. I really don't think he is dead." This was a very embarrassing moment for Sammartino as well as the viewers. Fortunately, Abrams hired Craig DeGeorge as a play by play announcer.

Wrestling will always be a medium in which the lively art of conversation is a crucial component of the finished product. As long as there are literate and entertaining personalities to provide much needed stage patter, wrestling will never be boring.

I'm Saturated and I Can't Get Up

By - Paul J. MacArthur

The recent disappointing buy rates for Wrestlemania and WrestleWar may indicate a decline in wrestling's popularity. Many have reported Wrestlemania received a 2.8 buy rate (a figure I question as Central New York systems around did a 4.8) and that must be cause for great debate in the Titan board room. The largest wrestling event of the year failed as a killer PPV and may indicate some severe problems within the organization or possibly the industry. The ratings for the wrestling's flagship cable programs are lagging. Even the last two Clashes and NBC specials drew relatively poor ratings. Yet, the cause of this problem is staring the promoters in the face, but they just can't bring themselves to address it. The television wrestling market is saturated.

During the cable boom of the early 80s, wrestling appeared in many markets where it hadn't been available for years. Georgia Championship Wrestling on WTBS became an institution as the Fabulous Freebirds, Ted DiBiase, Kevin Sullivan, Tony Atlas, Mr. Wrestling II, Roddy Piper, The Junkyard Dog and others gained national exposure most regional wrestlers only dreamed about. GCW on WTBS became one of the top rated cable television programs in the nation and soon USA network picked up Southwest Championship Wrestling. The ratings were excellent and eventually the well documented Vince McMahon take over occurred. By the mid 80s Vince McMahon and Jim Crockett ruled the cable television markets while the UWF, the AWA, World Class and the CWA drew solid numbers in local markets with off air stations. Wrestling appeared to be experiencing a television renaissance, but it was short lived.

By 1988, the UWF was bought out by the NWA, World Class' and AWA's ratings began to crumble and while the CWA's ratings were still solid, the departure of Lance Russell a year later cause a dramatic downslide in their ratings as well. Slowly, there became fewer and fewer options for wrestling fans and the NWA and the WWF saw that as an opportunity to further exploit their product. Now there are two choices for most of the country: WCW or the WWF. Some portions of the country get Memphis, the USWA, the ICW, the LPWA, Herb Abram's UWF, Portland and a few other regional promotions, but the dominate promotions on television are the WWF and WCW. Not only have they dominated the television market, they have saturated it with their own product.

The WWF has three hours of syndicated television per week. It also has three hours per week on USA, often replaying material shown on the syndicated programs. They also run five or six NBC specials, four major PPVs per year and will run two minor PPVs through

Titan's Hot Ticket series featuring "best of" matches from Wrestlemania in May and probably Hulk Hogan in the fall. WCW has three hours of syndicated television per week. They also have three to four hours per week on WTBS (though it is fun finding them during baseball season), five Clashes, five major PPVs and two minor PPVs over the course of the year. Presuming one were to watch all of the WWF & WCW wrestling available each week, 12 hours would be logged in front of the set each week. In the information age where there are so many options available to the average cable subscriber that is simply way too much time. The result is an what is known as cannibalism. A viewer has the choice of Wrestling Challenge or Wrestling Superstars or both. Some will choose both, but most will choose only one as they lack the time to watch both. Further, there is little need to watch both programs as the angles and matches are constantly being replayed so that while the WWF and WCW may produce 12 to 13 hours per week of television, a good deal of it contains material from the previous week or from another program airing that week. Reruns never do as well as original programs and when wrestling starts to rely on constantly replaying angles and matches, their ratings suffer. Thus, while theoretically two programs should draw twice the numbers, the law of diminishing returns comes into play because viewers are choosing only one product instead of both. The result: double the cost, less than double the return and giving the audience more than it cares to digest.

If you plan on purchasing all of WCW's and the WWF's PPVs, the price tag will be about \$210 in 1991. That will, in many cases, double the yearly cable bill. The result: lower buy rates. PPV is not a recession proof industry. The great gains wrestling made in the 80s with PPV were during a time when the economy was booming. Now when the economy is fragile, disposable income is low and taxes are rising, WCW and the WWF are offering more PPVs than ever. Some may attribute this trend to the industry's shift from arenas to PPV, but this is a dangerous movement. PPV, while an impulse industry, is very economically sensitive. When the economy takes a downturn, subscriptions to pay services drop and PPV buy rates suffer. There are exceptions, as the George Foreman/Evander Holyfield PPV should prove, but these exceptions occur because the promoters have managed to capture the imagination of the American public. McMahon has done it, most successfully with Wrestlemania III & IV. To a limited degree, WCW has done it as well. Now, each company is presenting six or seven PPVs a year; few of them have any significance. The result: they fail to capture the imagination of the public and resultantly fail to achieve high buy rates. There may be a trend toward PPV in the wrestling industry, but as the buy rates and revenues continue to fall that trend will need to be reversed for the health of the industry. Otherwise, wrestling PPVs buy rates will continue to plummet and eventually they may have trouble finding distributors willing to carry them.

The solution to the problem of television saturation is simple enough, but it requires restraint from the promoters. Georgia Championship Wrestling achieved phenomenal ratings because it was special. Every Saturday at 6PM something unique was going to happen, whether it be the results from the Omni card the previous Sunday, a new angle or an excellent match. Every week, there was a reason to tune in. It was also the only time to tune in with the exception of the "Best Of" show on Sunday that aired the previous weeks highlights, just in case your spouse or parents forced you to go to dinner the previous Saturday. WCW and the WWF need to follow the role model of GCW. They need to limit the amount of wrestling available on television to create a demand for their product.

Given the oversaturation of wrestling on television, WCW and the WWF need to do the following:

- 1) Limit the amount of wrestling on cable to three hours per week. For WCW this would require dropping the Power Hour or dropping an hour of WCW Saturday Night. As the Power Hour has become a throw away program with mostly sub par matches appearing opposite NWA Pro New York, the former idea is more desirable.

- 2) Limit syndicated television to two hours per week. WCW should drop the syndicated Main Event and the WWF should drop Wrestling Spotlight.
- 3) Limit free specials on NBC and WTBS to four times per year. Again this creates a demand for the product and should result in higher ratings.
- 4) Limit major PPVs to three times per year with each PPV being special, promoted solidly from top to bottom.
- 5) Eliminate bargain PPVs. They only serve to dilute the PPV product. If the bargain PPVs are more entertaining than the current major PPVs they will encourage lower buy rates for the majors. If they are markedly inferior, they will create a negative public image and discourage further purchases of the company's PPVs.
- 6) Create a need to watch every hour of wrestling available each week, every special and buy every PPV. Present quality television.

These ideas are hardly revolutionary. Rather, they represent, with slight variations, the television patterns the WWF used when they had solid PPV buy rates and excellent box office. Too much television has diluted the quality of the television product. Resultantly, fewer people are tuning in each week, tuning in for each special, buying PPVs and attending house shows. Too much mediocre television has partially caused the decline in the industry. The business is overexposed and will not recover until the promoters can create a demand for their product. As long as there is more of the product than the public desires, the demand, as Economics 101 will tell you, will lessen. It is a tricky balancing act as not enough television ensures the promotion's failure, while too much has caused the business to decline. WCW and the WWF need to find a medium. The solution is in front of their eyes if they can look past the dollar signs and towards the future.

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